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THE RITZ IDEA

The Story of a Great Hotel



THE
RITZ IDEA

*The Story of
a Great Hotel*

by

LUCIUS BEEBE



Privately Printed

ONE THOUSAND NINE HUNDRED THIRTY SIX

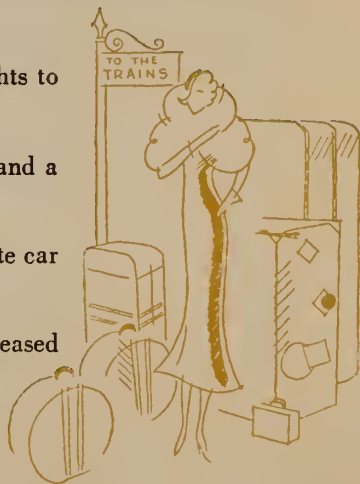
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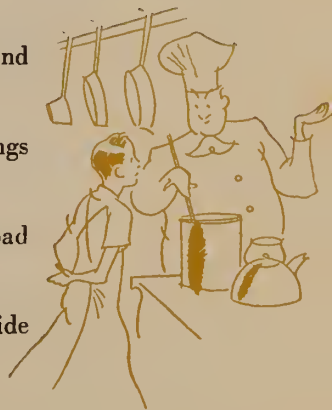
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HERE lived until recently a very great American lady whose pride it was that, although she was a world traveller of no small distinction and followed the seasons through the capitals and spas, watering places, winter resorts and mountain retreats of the Continent and her own country, she never went to bed save under her own roof. She maintained a stately town house on Madison Avenue in New York, a magnificent West End residence in London, villas at Cannes and Naples, a schloss in the Austrian Tyrol, an Ocean Boulevard establishment designed for her by Addison Mizner with a cool patio and gay cabanas at Palm Beach, a suburban estate in Westchester, a fishing camp with rights to one of the finest stretches of the Restigouche, and a Spanish hacienda at Santa Barbara. Her private car and ocean-going yacht took her where she pleased



and wherever she found herself she was at home. * * * Guided by a similarly discerning attitude toward the details of existence, there has come into being a more inclusive but none the less fastidious group of amateurs of fine living whose progress through the world is largely centered around its Ritz cities. They are known to the footmen on duty outside the restaurant of the Paris Ritz at the traditional formality of Sunday night dinner. In New York, Charles, the *maitre d'hotel*, has earmarked for them the first grouse of the season, rushed from the Scotch moors in hampers and ferried across the Atlantic aboard the Queen Mary. When they stop over in Boston on the way to Seal Harbor or for the Harvard-Yale game in November they take their "old fashioned" in one of the handsomest of all Ritz bars facing on Arlington Street and the Public Garden. * * * To them the Ritz hotels are a universally recognized hallmark of a distinguished way of life. * * * The Ritz tradition came

into being through the agency of a Swiss youth who foresaw the possibilities of public entertainment in a manner until a century ago reserved only for the private palaces and chateaux of Europe. Born the son of a hotel man with a background in a race productive of so many of the great taverners of history, Cesar Ritz in the middle of the nineteenth century essayed the traditional *cursus honorum* of the Continental restaurateur, starting as a kitchen helper in Paris, serving as apprentice under one of the ranking *maitres* of his time, Brassac of the Voisin, and, in time, achieving the rank of restaurant manager in Monte Carlo's extravagantly ormolu and cloisonné Grand Hotel. * * * Cannes, Lucerne, Baden Baden, Rome, the resorts of a now vanished world of fashion and the watering places that knew the old, bearded kings of Europe, all were milestones along the highroad that was to bring Cesar Ritz, in the opulent noontide



of the Victorian nineties, to London as manager of the Savoy Hotel. Then, it was said that "the best chefs in France are in the kitchens of London," and, in a midst where Galsworthy's Forsytes were realizing a dream of British world-supremacy, Cesar Ritz was able to establish his own contribution to the tradition of hotel service: absolute deference to the individual tastes of the most exacting patrons. Not only, however, were guests accorded every princely consideration of service. Cesar Ritz foresaw an era in hotel management when such material considerations as a sufficiency of bath rooms, expeditious floor service and many other modern facilities would be taken for granted, and he was the first to introduce them into his European establishments. * * * And in the almost overnight success of the Savoy, as in Cesar Ritz's other triumphs, his partner was Auguste Escoffier who, within a single lifetime, revitalized the entire existing tradition of French gastronomy. For he preached that

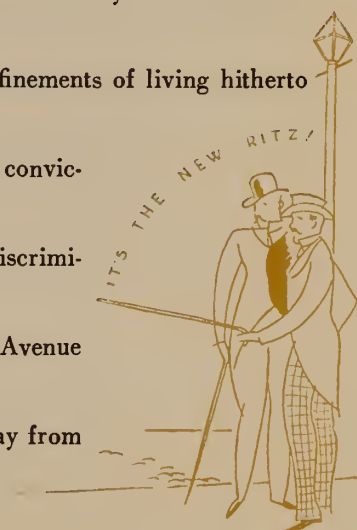
simplicity was the ultimate grace in cultivated dining and that, for all its turtle soup and Southdown mutton and hogsheads of claret, the indiscriminate profusion of a Lord Mayor's banquet was a poor second to the distinguished service of a few perfect and harmonious dishes. * * *

From the Savoy Cesar Ritz crossed the Channel to establish on the Place Vendome in Paris the first of the hotels to bear his name and there, as in the Strand, he contrived for the first time in history to convince the aristocracy of France that public dining was not only suitable for the titled great of the world and for the over-lords of its finances, but almost a social requirement. Formal Sunday night dining at the Ritz became a glittering European tradition, and its corridors and lounges were flooded with tiderips of princes, grand dukes and court chamberlains on the services of royal masters. From then until now the various Ritz hotels



have been the established resorts of royal and imperial personages who discovered in them a uniformity of service which was as dependable away from home as that in their own villas and palaces. And when he returned to London, at the summons of a group of British entrepreneurs, to establish there the Carlton and Ritz hotels, Cesar Ritz was accustomed to a clientèle of titled grandeur. * * * New York's Ritz-Carlton had its origin when, in 1907, Charles Wetmore, the architect, and Robert W. Goelet, a nephew of Wetmore's partner, Whitney Warren, and a considerable proprietor of Manhattan real estate, interested themselves in organizing in America a hotel whose management and operation should be under the direction of the Ritz Hotels Development Company of England. The site selected was one of Mr. Goelet's properties at the corner of Madison Avenue and Forty-sixth Street. When the hotel was begun, Madison Avenue in the Forties was a suburban wasteland flanked by the unquiet

reaches of the New York Central's train yards and switch points leading to the old Forty-second Street terminal. A block away, Fifth Avenue was still very much of a residential street, and the terraces and penthouses of Park Avenue were still in the unimagined future. * * * Three years later, when Albert Keller ushered his first guests to their suites while Escoffier, from his kitchen fastness below, proudly supervised the service of the first meals, three questions which had confronted the entrepreneurs of the Ritz project were answered. Would New York, they had asked themselves, accustomed to established and characteristically American hotel management, respond to the Ritz idea of refinements of living hitherto known only to Europe? It was Mr. Goelet's conviction that it would. Would substantial and discriminating New Yorkers venture over to Madison Avenue and Forty-sixth Street to lunch and dine away from



the accepted region of Fifth Avenue where land values were five times as high? Mr. Goelet thought so and was willing to back his judgment. Even if they were willing to patronize a restaurant in this part of town, would patrons be willing to take up residence away from the hotel district to the south and west? Mr. Goelet felt that the focal center of social Manhattan was drifting inevitably north and east. Within the first year of its operation the Ritz entirely justified his decision. * * * Throughout the latter years of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth century American hotels subscribed to a tradition of florid and rococo magnificence. Boston's Tremont House, the earliest first class hostelry in

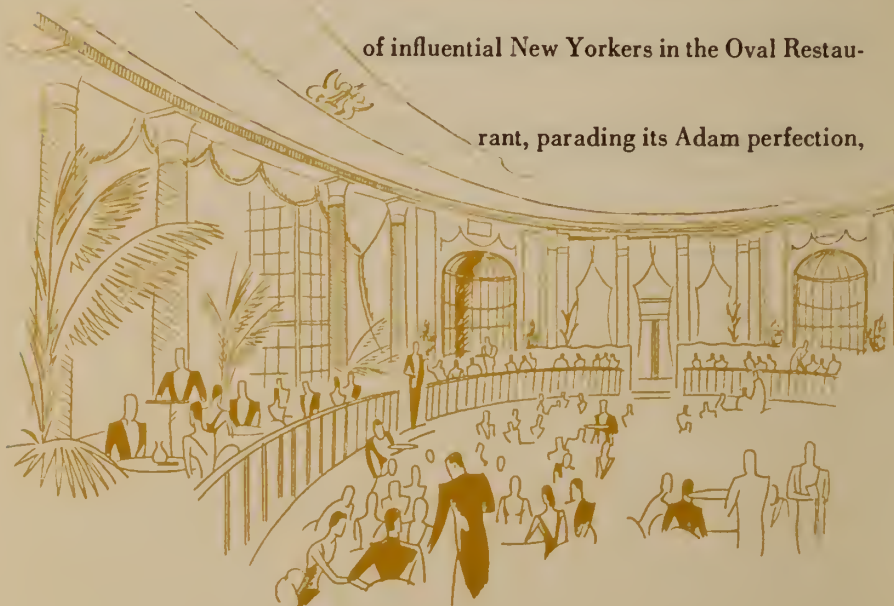
the United States, had given way in baroque succession to the Revere House and, later, Parker's in School Street. Elsewhere notable landmarks flourished, awash with Turkey carpets, floriated bronze



electroliers and handsome brass cuspidors: the St. Charles in New Orleans, the Planters above the river in St. Louis, Brown's Palace in Denver and the Palmer House in Chicago with its barbershop floor literally paved with silver dollars. In downtown New York the wonders of the Astor House and the Brevoort, where Cunard captains assured visiting Englishmen they would be safe from the Indians who were accustomed to roam Broadway, had given way to Peacock Alley and the damask upholstered glories of the old Waldorf. The Ritz-Carlton had just two things to offer: * * * Continental dining of an exquisite perfection never dreamed of in America, and a classic restraint in appointments and service beyond anything yet conceived in the realm of public hospitality. And these immediate tangible assets were destined to bring into being a third, less tangible but even more precious: the patronage of the most urbane and distinguished clientèle ever attracted to any hotel on this

side of the Atlantic. * * * Mr. Keller had been brought up in the same tradition as Cesar Ritz himself and had served under him both in Rome and at the Savoy. Experience had shown that if he secured the proper patronage from the outset, the hotel's success was assured, and, through his many connections in the world's capitals, he set about enlisting diplomats, publishers, celebrated authors, industrialists and others whose names made news as Ritz figures. Lord Dewar, Marquis of Aberdeen and Governor of Ireland, gave a magnificent dinner for a hand picked group

of influential New Yorkers in the Oval Restaurant, parading its Adam perfection,



its miracles of service and the largest hanging ceiling ever incorporated in the architecture of a hotel. * * * Charles Schwab, a table amateur of fine perceptions, heralded the fame of Escoffier the length and breadth of the land. Alfredo Tornquist, the Argentine banker, was among the first to maintain a permanent suite for his convenience when in the United States.

It was at the Ritz that the Queen of Roumania was formally welcomed to New York society by a great dinner and ball. Frank Munsey, Edward F. Hutton, James Donahue and James Moffat entertained splendidly. Albert Gallatin, in 1911, gave a dinner for the American polo team which made history in a town accustomed to glittering entertainment on a large scale. Clarence Mackay, Sir Thomas Lipton and Colonel Matt Wynn intrusted entertainment to the banquet department and found their dinners and suppers incorporated in the New York legend of gilt-edge hospitality.

* * * A year or two later other chapters were added by the Ritz to

hotel history. Despite a barrage of infuriated protest from Arthur Brisbane in his editorial columns, women were permitted the established Continental convenience of smoking in the main restaurant without having to seek the privacy of retiring rooms. At the same time the popularity of public dancing reached an all-time high in New York, and the Crystal Room with its tented ceiling and glittering chandeliers was opened for dancing between the courses of dinner and supper. Conservative as it was in general tone and atmosphere, the Ritz contrived to keep abreast of the times when good sense and manners dictated innovation. * * *

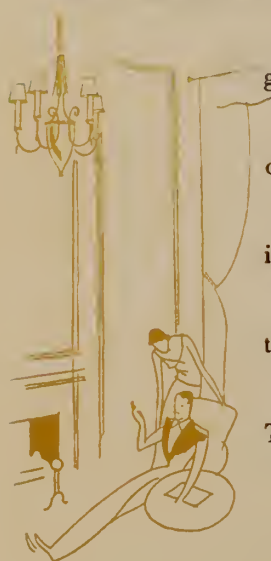
Today, as the Crystal Gardens, it has been completely renovated, maintaining, however, its distinguished identity, and air-conditioned. * * *

In the Oval Room the continental custom of a formal Sunday evening



dinner is to be introduced as the background for dignified musical entertainment and other divertissements. The Oak Room, too, long the province of John, has been air-conditioned and its panelled walls, for some years painted over, restored to their original subdued charm. * * * An interesting side-light on the prestige deriving from membership in the Ritz-Carlton organization is the frequency with which the phrase "formerly of the Ritz" is appended to the names of restaurateurs, hair-dressers and hotel executives now in business elsewhere. From waiter to house manager, any Ritz employee is assured of advantageous employment, so widespread is the respect in which the management is held as a training school for hoteliers. * * * In its private apartments it was the object of the hotel's architect that the substantial comforts of a country home, where space is at no premium, should be incorporated in the necessarily limited confines of an urban residence. To this end special attention was

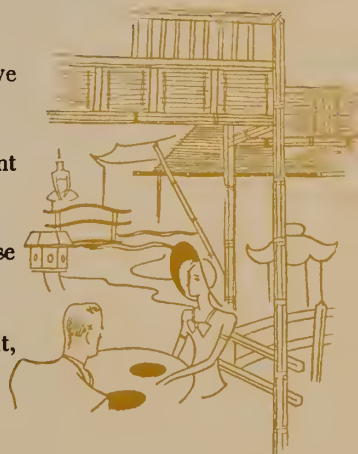
paid to the proportions of the rooms themselves, whether single apartments or de luxe suites. The ceilings of the Ritz rooms are higher than those of the modern hotel in New York, a feature which at once has the practical advantage of assured ventilation and creates an illusion of spacious dignity in keeping with the atmosphere of the house as a whole. The décor of drawing rooms, bedroom and private dining rooms alike has been the devising of artists and artisans concerned that Ritz living appointments should parallel those of the most harmoniously furnished private residences, and the frontispiece of this volume gives at least some sug-



gestion of the simplicity and good taste characteristic of their designs. * * * The Ritz-Carlton prides itself in particular on the patronage it attracts from the ranks of distinguished foreigners to New York. This, Mr. Keller feels, is not alone due to the circum-

stance that their own languages are common to all the personnel of the hotel but more because their familiarity with the uniformity of Ritz standards abroad has convinced them that in Manhattan the same index of service and luxury must obtain. Nothing, too, gives Mr. Keller the satisfaction of welcoming home a strayed patron who has essayed other residences and returned to the Ritz fold. "We are willing to match any first class hotel in our scale of prices, dollar for dollar," he says. "Our prices are no dearer than those of other luxury hotels and for them you get also Ritz-Carlton service which simply cannot be obtained elsewhere."* * *

Despite change and the ever-shifting allegiance of New York's formal society, the two season restaurants of the Ritz have maintained their supremacy as one of the dominant rendezvous of the town. In summer the Japanese Garden and at other seasons the Adam restaurant,



presided over by the bland Charles, are once more filled to a pre-depression luncheon capacity and, in a town where pre-theater dining is still largely accomplished in private homes, they receive their due share of attention from discriminating gourmets. * * * The repeal of national prohibition and the revival of de luxe dining in established restaurants brought back to the Ritz an impressive portion of the town's gracious entertainment. More than anything else, a generation which found itself in retreat from the dubious restaurants of the twenties demanded the illusion of spacious surroundings, light, color and the ultimate refinements of service. Formality in the evening, the judicious selection of menus and a return to the restraint and good taste of cultivated dining evolved simultaneously and repeopled the bars and restaurants of New York which for more than a decade had suffered from the illicit but dominant competition of establishments where liquor was available. The

winecard and cellars of the Ritz boasted vintages which demanded the complement of fine food and its properly ordered selection. Some appreciation of the precepts of Brillat-Savarin emerged from an era of whisky and severe headaches, and the chef's requisitions again began to call for canvasback from the rice fields of North Carolina, Strassburg pâté studded with the truffles of Perigord, the rare cheeses of the Continent and the Maryland terrapin which have been part of the tradition of American table fare since colonial times. Chef Louis Diat, successor to Escoffier, had come into his own again. Eating, in a word, was supplanted by dining.

* * * But the most prized of all the Ritz-Carlton's heritages, that of the most important of New York's private entertainments, dinners, banquets, balls, debutante parties and suppers, has remained constant and subject only to the general trends and tendencies of the times. It is



conceivable that few balls may again approximate the lavish magnificence of the debuts of Barbara Hutton and Natalie Coe in 1929, but a Ritz-Carlton debutante launching is still a desirable preface to a career in the established circles of New York society. Some idea of the demand for suitable dates for debutante parties may be derived from the circumstance that, just as the names of candidates for admission to the Knickerbocker or Union Clubs or to such preparatory schools as Groton and Saint Marks are filed shortly after birth, advantageous evenings for debutante parties are not infrequently reserved at the Ritz five years in advance! * * *

Call it a standard of quality, a household synonym for the superlative excellences of living, a hallmark of distinguished taste, the name Ritz-Carlton, after more than a quarter of a cycle of almost fabulous existence, is an integral part of the New York legend, a glamorous fragment of the life and being of the most important metropolis of the Western World.









